Title: “Depicting ‘Biblical’ Narratives: A Test Case on Noah”

Abstract:

This chapter explores two relatively recent Bible epics based on ancient narratives concerning Noah and a Flood: Kenneth Glenaan’s “The Ark” for the BBC (2015) and Darren Aronofsky’s “Noah” for Paramount (2014). The chapter explores the underlying ANE-textual background to each production, including comments made by the respective Directors. Making use of narrative theory and exegesis, we go on to explore the role of biblical and extra-biblical material in the development of the characterisation and plot of each production and then explore the deployment of such texts in the overall theological freight of the production, both explicit and implicit – what does each production say about God/the divine and how much is this dependent on the use of biblical materials or dramatic/poetic license. The chapter concludes with some reflection on the minor role which biblical literacy plays within cultural depictions of biblical traditions.

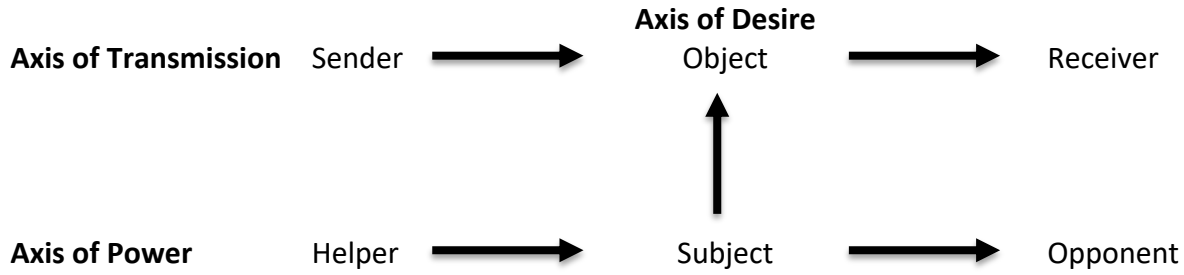
Once upon a time, in the guild of postmodern biblical scholarship, we would all have known what to do with the story of Noah. As if we had unearthed it in a treasure chest, or amidst Aesop’s fables or Grimm’s fairy tales, in good post-formalist Proppian style, we would simply employ something like actantial analysis to the plot. Of course, Biblical texts are a little less easy to fit into the same structure as fairy tales. And the few Bible scholars who have run in this direction for some new purchase on the text have tended to want to recreate the analysis in a Biblical direction.

Mark Stibbe’s book, *John as Storyteller,* was one of the first places I discovered an attempt to match the two. I thought it was a strange affair born out of a desire to rethink structural genre criticism for contemporary biblical studies. Propp had developed a model for interpreting Russian folk-tales. But A.J.Greimas then sought to develop this model “as the permanent structure behind all narratives.”[1] In Greimas’ theory, actions can be broken down into six actants. These actants are then assigned to different elements of the action along three different oppositional axes – the axis of desire (the volitional axis) links the actants of subject and object, the axis of power links the actants of helper and opponent and the axis of transmission (in Greimas = “knowledge”)[2] links the primary sender and ultimate receiver, as in the following diagram:

[1] Mark Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Algirdas J. Greimas, *Sémantique structural*, Paris: Presse Universitaires de France, 1966. For a contemporary representation and further developments, including an attempt to work out a New Testament theme of salvation like John 3:16, see Louis Hébert, “The Actantial Model”, 2006 (extended version in French as Louis Hébert, *Dispositifs pour l'analyse des textes et des images*, Signo, Rimouski (Quebec) 2007), available online http://www.signosemio.com/greimas/actantial-model.asp, accessed 24.04.2018

[2] Hébert, “Actantial Model”, p.1, “the axis of knowledge, according to Greimas”

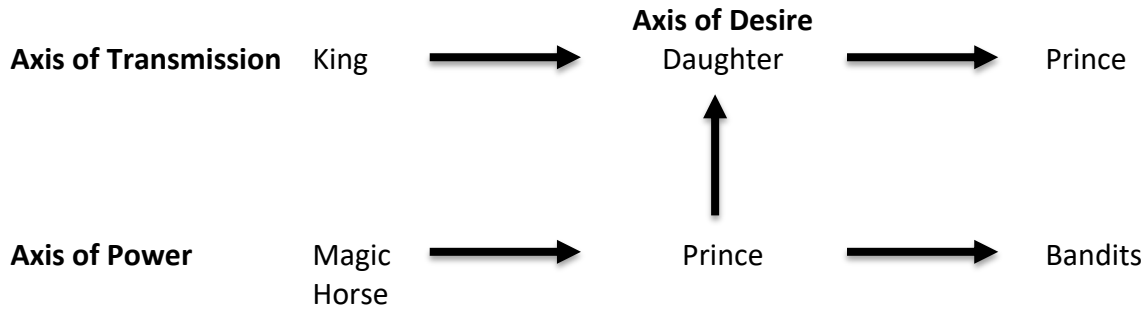
Figure 1



Stibbe outlines the process through a paradigmatic narrative:[3]

> A story is usually begun when a sender tells a receiver to undertake some task. The volitional axis represents this quest; the power axis, the struggle involved in its execution. Thus, a story in which a king sends a prince to find his daughter, and in which the prince is waylaid by bandits before being helped by a magic horse to his prize would be schematized by Greimas as follows:

Figure 2



Roland Barthes had explored applying actantial analysis to the biblical narrative, specifically to Genesis 32, the story of Jacob's struggle at Peniel – interpreting Jacob as a hero on a quest (ordeal) and the angel/God as both sender (the originator of the quest) and the hero's opponent.[4] The Biblical narrative, in a way, subverts the quest genre. As Stibbe puts it:[5] "At the moment of discovery, Jacob recognizes that his Opponent is none other than God himself! In narratological terms, the Receiver realizes the Sender and the Opponent and Helper are all one and the same! It is God who sends Jacob down the axis of volition, and it is God who meets Jacob on the axis of power." Barthes finds the outworking of the narrative to be deeply disturbing, a scandal, and comments:[6] "there is only one type of narrative that can present this paradoxical form – narratives relating to an act of blackmail." But in this narrative, this ordeal by combat,

[3] Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, p.36
[4] Roland Barthes, "The Struggle with the Angel: A Structural Analysis of Genesis 32:22-32" in Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (translation by Stephen Heath), London: Fontana, 1977, pp.125-142
[5] Stibbe, *John as Storyteller*, p.37
[6] Barthes, "The Struggle", p.138

there is an impasse which God seeks to break by touching Jacob's hip. However, Jacob is not defeated but instead draws a blessing from God:[7]

> The sequence itself, however, actional, however anecdotal it may be, functions to *unbalance* the opponents in combat, not only by the unforeseen victory of the one over the other, but above all (let us be fully aware of the *formal* subtlety of the surprise) by the illogical, *inverted*, nature of the victory. In other words […] the combat, as it is reversed in its unexpected development, *marks* one of the combatants: the weakest defeats the strongest, *in exchange for which* he is marked (on the thigh).

Barthes' interpretation concludes by referring to the passage as a *metonymic montage* in which the various themes associated with Jacob and Esau's relationship, their experience of God, their economic and material differentiation, their rites of naming and meals are not developed but rather combined. Barthes argues that this montage is the stuff of dreams, or of the unconscious. The reader is presented with an explosive narrative which should not be argued away but instead allowed to destabilise, "to hold its *signifiance* fully open".[8]

How might we apply such analysis to the basic story of Noah? We could argue that the subject of the narrative is Noah and that he is seeking salvation/safety/rescue – this is his object. It is a worthwhile quest, although one sometimes wonders whether Old Testament characters, sometimes called Patriarchs, really are seeking salvation or redemption, which are perhaps too easily post-reformation protestant words. The characters themselves seem to spend most of their time living out their lives, often being quite successful at that, before in some way or another they become aware of God calling them to something more…or less… Almost as though God surprises them by his presence, by his call to action and drags them sometimes kicking and screaming into his narrative.

Does the Noah story offer a similar conundrum or is it a much more straightforward quest? Noah is God's subject/God's actor, playing out God's *Heilsgeschichte* – salvation for the remnant.

			Axis of Desire		
Axis of Transmission	God	→	Salvation	→	Remnant
			↑		
Axis of Power	God	→	Noah	→	God, family, others

God gives Noah a quest which is itself multilayered – to build a boat, to save his family, to provide a remnant. The context of this quest is God's anger at the world's violence caused by the very people he has caused to fill the earth (Gen 6:13). The details of the ark's construction are given in detail and as such the building of the boat becomes the pragmatic focus on the narrative. But the boat is a means to an end. The actual quest (to save a remnant) is revealed as Noah is told that not only will the ark be home to his family but also to a massive collection of

[7] Barthes, The Struggle", pp.133-134, emphasis in the original
[8] Barthes, "The Struggle", p.141

animals and all that is needed to look after them. The ark is to be a kind of capsule to save something of creation itself. But, as we shall see in the depictions of Noah later in the text, this is also a personal quest for Noah. We are told from the outset that Noah is a righteous man (Gen 6:9) and that he did everything just as God commanded him (Gen 6:22). The various contemporary depictions, see this quest as a personal quest for Noah himself – a teasing out of his character before God. But such a process is not known to the Biblical text itself which does not have anything to say about Noah's darker side until he is caught drunk and naked after sampling the first post-fluvial vintage (Gen 9:20). Other traditions bring such reflection in earlier – noticeably in the Islamic versions, the York mystery plays and even in the New Testaments reflection on Noah's story and his faith.

As with Barthes, we are both ready and eager to investigate the internal quest that lies behind the apparent simplicity of this text. The quest is not just to build a boat, just as God's command to Abraham to take Isaac into the desert, is not about child sacrifice (Gen 22). Both narratives are about the inner life of the patriarch, their willingness to follow God, to trust God, to rely upon his guidance. As shown in the actantial analysis of the story – God is preeminent in both the narrative and in power. God initiates the quest and provides for the resolution of the quest. God questions the patriarch and gives the resources and knowledge and even the space for the patriarch to resolve the question that has been asked. Actantial analysis gives us insight into the power behind the narrative, the initiation behind the narrative and, in a way, the subordinate role of all the patriarchs – they are there to do the bidding of Yahweh and their obedience seems to be determinative of their blessing, even if they can at times seem to best Yahweh in their diplomatic skills! Despite us perhaps wanting to see them as heroes of quests, the patriarchs are depicted as the receivers of God's commands, secondary to him, subordinate to his will.

Perhaps we are getting ahead of ourselves. Isn't this just a mythical story after all – a folktale which has its counterparts in so many cultures. Noah (or whatever he is called in one of the many alternative traditions) is sent by Yahweh (substitute just about any creator God figures – indeed we could build a grid of Noah's names against creator Gods) to save the earth, or rather some small remnant of human kind and the animal kingdom, from a purification flood which the divine him/her/itself is about to send as a kind of rethink over how things have gone in the last couple of chapters of Genesis.

Or we could do something much more complex like James Tehrani did for Red Riding Hood – look at all the various versions of the folk story around Europe and create a phylogenetic network analysis of all the different types and variations – a genetic tree of alterity.[9] But for a story which has Biblical and Qu'ranic traditions, which may link back to the earlier traditions of Enuma Elish, and which seems to have a whole host of cross-references in other literate and pre-literate cultures across different continents, such a phylogenesis would be a massively complex endeavor to even begin.

Why are we so keen though to go for the inner experience of Noah? Do we find in these folk stories something of the realm of the unconscious, as Barthes puts it? Do we see the need to resolve something of the human condition itself in these stories? Perhaps because folk tales do not exist for their own benefit – they do not recount a singular narrative event, but rather point

[9] Jamshid Tehrani, Quan Nguyen and Teemu Roos "Oral fairy tale or literary fake? Investigating the origins of Little Red Riding Hood using phylogenetic network analysis", *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 2015 (available at: http://dsh.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2015/06/21/llc.fqv016)

to something more *metonymic*, something more basic at the heart of what it means to be human. Perhaps this is why I have jumped into the whole folklore genre. Fairy tales and folk stories point to deeper truths and rather than seek to interpret them through the usual paraphernalia of historical-critical biblical studies, we should allow them to play around in our own psyches and create new connections, as noted in Jack Zipes' exploration of the origin of the "irrestible" fairy tale.[10] Early on, Zipes refers to Arthur Frank's insistence that fairy tales are not to be interpreted but rather readers should allow the tales to feed into our own imaginations (something we will see happening in both our Noah examples), and allow them to "breathe life into our daily undertakings".[11] Frank argues that his role is to "uncover the claims and operating premises of socio-narratology" – to disclose what the fairy tales are saying about social conventions and patterns rather than to demythologize or unpick them from historical settings.

So, the reason for starting off with a discussion of actantial analysis, usually reserved for the study of fairy tales, is not to depreciate the Noah narratives as history but rather to see this passage as a piece of socio-narratology, a social narrative which speaks into the bigger picture of our engagement with an irresistible God. Moreover, our study of two modern retellings of the story shows how the tale morphs into contemporary neuroses or preferred narratives. The ancient text is not really concerned with the inner psychology of Noah (although again compare the Jacob narrative at Peniel (Gen 22) which is precisely concerned with Jacob's inner conversations). But modern narratology is massively interested in the internal workings of the subject's brain. Although perhaps "modern" here is a mistake. There are plenty of examples in the Bible and in Greco-Roman literature, for example, of self-reflection and of commentary on what is going on in someone else's mind. It is wrong to assume, as some do in contemporary cultural studies, that such reflection was invented by Shakespeare. Wherever it came from, contemporary reinterpretations, retellings of the Noah narratives will be geared towards contemporary social norms and thus towards Noah's internal conversations either with his own doubts or fears, or with his assumptions about religion, family and society. It is precisely this route which both Jordan and Aronofsky take.

The raw material of the narrative, of course, is relatively sparse and the key problem (or the key spark to the imagination) with any interpretation of the Noah story might not be how much material there is (*Game of Thrones* in either of its dual traditions [novelistic or filmic] springs to mind) but rather how little. Eight verses of historical background (Gen 6:1-7, 11-13), a few verses saying that Noah was a good man (Gen 5:30-32, Gen 6:8,9,22, Gen 7:1), a few to describe Noah's boat-building task (Gen 6:14-16) and the coming deluge (Gen 6:17, 7:4, 11-12, 17-20), interspersed with snippets of those to be saved – both Noah's family (Gen 6:10, 18, 7:1, 13, 23) and the chosen fauna (Gen 6:19-20, 7:2-3, 8-9. 14-16). Each micro-theme remains largely undeveloped. Instead the three main strings of the narrative (warnings of impurity, a family to be saved and the animals) are wrapped around the ark and the impending doom, intercollated, intersected, enmeshed with one another. The same point reinforced by slight alteration and recoupling. A bible story contorted within itself.

For the modern reader, so used to inner conversations, motives and doubts, there is so much that is simply not here – just scant measurements, numbers of animals, a family. There is no

[10] Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012

[11] Zipes, *Irresistible Fairy Tale*, p.3, citing Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010

explanation of the process of building such a massive boat; no discussion of mercy (unlike Abraham's bartering when confronted with God's wrath over Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 18:22-33); no details to help make anything really understandable. Although Noah's story is told in different places in the Qu'ran (Suras 57, 11 and 23), there is still little solid context to draw on. Some details are given in the text – for example, speculation about Noah's lost son (Sura 11:42-46). But most of the rest depends on later speculation.

For a contemporary retelling, so much has to be added for the modern reader/viewer. How much more also for a movie blockbuster to fit our contemporary need for characterization, empathy, family values, blood and gore. So when Tony Jordan, famed Eastenders screenwriter, adapts the story for the BBC, we are taken geographically to the desert, but a desert populated by Mancunians (although the youngest son strangely seems to have spent too much time down the road in Liverpool), sitting at an elevated table to eat their food, and engaging in so many anachronistic pastimes that well-known Exeter Hebrew Bible professor Francesca Stavrakopoulou's Twitter feed almost went into meltdown during the show's airing.[12] Jordan's *Noah* is full of teenage angst, family arguments, lectures on austerity and poverty, tirades against Dawkins-type atheism, hints of the Noah traditions found in the Qu'ran, but even more content found in Jordan's own imagination and artistic license.

Of course, as Frank argues, we need to let the story breathe and Jordan certainly allows the story to breathe in the air of the contemporary soap opera. There is little attempt here to create any kind of historically-true narrative. But the BBC are famous for faithful period dramas. If they can get Poldark right, then, surely, they can get the Bible right? But that's a misreading of this piece of media. This isn't a period drama – the period isn't really specified and the plot is a little scant for even the briefest dramatic account. So those who expect to see a period drama, a faithful reenactment of the Biblical account, are bound to be frustrated. There is not enough here to create a period drama. The core material is a snapshot rather than a blueprint. The details cannot be reconstructed from what the narrative or its context tells us. Instead, the adaptor creates a series of anachronisms: use of horses, iron nails, IKEA-type furniture, sex acts in the house, a detached stone dwelling with enclosed rooms – and we could go on all night.

What Jordan's *Noah* is trying to do is to furnish the story with enough props which the contemporary will recognize, so that she can, somewhat ironically, strip back the story to tell the core message – the interplay between the three central characters – Noah, his family and their God. In other words, the scant narrative is expanded with contemporary props, allusions, concerns, narratives and events. The Noah narrative becomes a kind of modern mystery play where the biblical narrative is used to tell a secondary narrative about the guild's role in a medieval British city, or to poke fun at key members of the local community, much like a pantomime. Dawkins' tirades against religion are spoken into what is supposed to be a stone-age city (!) as an allusion to the viewer's contemporary context – see, nothing changes!

By doing this the viewer is left comfortable enough to accept the underlying narrative of a prophetic outcast being told by an angelic messenger to build an alarmingly big boat in the middle of a desert – a decidedly non-contemporary narrative. Overall, the piece does its job remarkably well. Jordan's liberal attitude to the historical narrative is quite deliberate. In a

[12] The BBC pages for their 2015 adaptation of Noah: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05psczv.

preview meeting in London, Jordan explored the ins and outs of writing a Bible epic.[13] In the end, the narrative of the adaptation becomes a reflection of Jordan's own theological convictions about the world in which he himself lives and the need for the narrative to demonstrate God's mercy rather than his wrath. He lets the story breathe – he allows the fairy tale to become a social narrative for the modern day.

Of course, Jordan's *Noah* was much less expensive to make than Darren Aronfsky's "bloated, bombastic CGI-fest".[14] Aronofsky's *Noah* is a proper multimillion dollar Hollywood blockbuster complete with special effects, blood and gore, even robot-like angels and a gross income of $362m dollars.[15] To some extent the film seems to have more connection with post-apocalyptic thrillers than with bible epics. Noah is a mean street fighter in a toxic, dying world, protecting his family and striving for what is right – the opening scenes seem to come from something like the *Book of Eli* or *Mad Max*. Perhaps to push us into a reflection of our own contemporary condition (echoes here of Frank's theorising and Jordan's updating of the underlying 'fairy tale') we are presented with a post-industrial world that faces imminent destruction because of the cost of unchecked technological development.

Interpreting the 'Nephilim' of Gen 6:4 in terms of the Watchers from the Enoch traditions, Aronofsky portrays these guides of early humanity as fallen angels encrusted, imprisoned, by the very rocks of the earth, as pseudo-robotic allies and enemies at the same time – sometimes pet-like in their support, at others, such as in the flood sequence itself, formidable fighting machines.

In Aronofsky, Noah's world is a strange mix of technological urban culture vs environmental rural isolation – one of the stars (Emma Watson) said in an interview: "I think what Darren's going for is a sense that it could be set in any time. It could be set sort of like a thousand years in the future or a thousand years in the past. ... You shouldn't be able to place it too much."[16] I'm not sure of the details but the sense of timelessness is clear. This is a modern morality play about contemporary society's dystopian love affair with technology. Noah and his family represent the rural fightback, the nature warriors who seek to contain technology and to allow the earth to flourish. This is a trope familiar in many contemporary SF narratives (whether science fiction or speculative fiction)

In that same theme, Aronofsky, in writing what he called the least biblical film ever, provides a foil for Noah in the character of Lamech's son, the maker of tools in bronze and iron, Tubal Cain (Gen 4.22). Tubal Cain represents the chaotic, industrial, brutish, worldy antithesis to Noah's ascetic, environmental, family-orientated goodness. Cain fights, builds, rules, slaughters. He embodies the very horror of the world, which Yahweh has determined must end. But gradually through the film, Aronofsky forces the viewer to ask whether this antithesis is real. Both men are seeking to save their own people. Both men are horrified by God's silence. Both men are seeking both justice and mercy. Indeed, Noah's insistence that all of humanity must die, including his

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[13] Sadly the preview meeting was not recorded but Jordan repeated many of the comments in an article for the Radio Times: http://www.radiotimes.com/news/2015-03-30/the-ark-writer-tony-jordan-on-his-biblical-drama-and-putting-religion-on-primetime/ accessed 30 May 2018

[14] Gerard O'Donovan, *The Ark review: BBC One* (available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/tv-and-radio-reviews/11505027/The-Ark-review-BBC-One-engaging.html)

[15] For details of the film including plot synopsis, see IMDB: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1959490/synopsis?ref_=tt_stry_pl

[16] The quotation is available in several press reports but also available online at http://emmapedia.wikia.com/wiki/Noah, accessed May 30th 2018

own family, becomes an increasingly malevolent theme. Apparently denying Ham a wife, threatening to kill Shem and Ila's unborn child(ren), isolated at his own forge in the heart of the ark, Noah seems to become more and more like his mortal enemy, the exact opposite of a 'good man'. The biblical story about a good man living in obedience and saving the remnant of creation seems to be turned on its head as we watch Noah about to plunge a dagger into his granddaughter's heart. In Aronofsky, the fairy tale is not just allowed to breathe but also to mutate into a monster.

Much like Jordan, Aronofsky is keen to make this story his own – to show how evil lies not in the social structures, whether industrial or environmental, but actually within the heart of man himself. Noah has to face his own demons and come to terms with his own monstrosity. This is the completely unbiblically biblical truth which Aronofsky has decided to share through this movie. And when interviewers question why, Aronofsky is quite clear – he wants to get to the heart of the Noah story and for Aronofsky the question is all about justice and mercy.

Aronofsky, or his research team, have done some hard work piecing together the various developments of the Noah story. After exploring Genesis, Jubilees, Enoch and the Zohar, after a creative process of moulding the traditions together and finding a synthesis between text and imagination, Aronofsky declares his Noah to be an exercise in midrash: "the text exists and is truth and the word and the final authority. But how you decide to interpret it, you can open up your imagination to be inspired by it."[17] What lies at the heart of Aronofsky's midrash, Aronofsky's *Noah*, is the exploration of *khamas* – the *khamas* of Tubal Cain's industrial brutality, the *khamas* of Noah the radicalized loner, the *khamas* which the Creator inflicts upon his own creation in response.

If the retellings of the Noah narratives stray from the biblical account and introduce concepts drawn from other sources or from the writers' own creativity and imagination, constantly pulling in more detail to help the reader connect, then perhaps the issue is not with the filmmakers faithfully reproducing the bible or playing fast and loose with the text, but with the kind of text that Noah's story is. Perhaps it's better to understand Noah as something other than history, something closer to a kind of narrative kernel within the Old Testament – a story which shows something of the prehistory of Yahweh's relationship with the world but not really in the same relational terms that we will find in the later patriarchs. A kind of ur-covenant-cycle-cum-nature-explanation-story-cum-heroic-patriarch-cum-bogeyman-God-story? Perhaps as a fairy tale, a myth, a metynomic narrative pointing to the relationship between a patriarch and his God?

So, Fred Blumenthal starts his Jewish Bible Quarterly essay: "The story of Noah's ark, understood as a metaphor, conveys a significant religious tenet, whereas as a factual occurrence is poses numerous problems."[18] A ship this large a thousand years before iron age tools were available – just fanciful. Placid animals from all over the world fed on what? Their excrement disposed of how? The text doesn't work. It's crap. Precisely the way in which Eddie Izzard deals with the Noah story, as explored by Chris Meredith in an essay entitled "A Big Room of Poo: Eddie Izzard's Bible and the Literacy of Laughter".[19] Meredith and Izzard have much fun taking the bible story at face value and attempting to prove the failure of the text. Meredith explores the Ark's deficit –

[17] Darren Aronofsky quoted in Peter Chattaway's "The Noah Effect", *Christianity Today* 58.4 (May 2014) (available at: http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/95843772/noah-effect)
[18] Fred Blumenthal, "Noah's Ark as Metaphor", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, (40.2, 2012), p.89
[19] In Katie Edwards (ed.), *Rethinking Biblical Literacy*, chapter 9

no way to get rid of the animal's excrement. Jordan's *Noah* omits this period of the story, whereas Aronofsky's animals are (somewhat eerily) anaesthetized. But there is nowhere to put the poo. No door to expel it. The ark is constipated.

Meredith concludes: "What is also at stake here, though, is the unworkable nature of the story, the fact that the myth implies, or really demands, a series of everyday details that it cannot sustain. The failure of the text is comic."[20] And Izzard exploits the gaps in the text, the paucity of the text, to satirise it and to make a mockery of all that the story stands for. There is nothing in Izzard's or Meredith's reading that we might see as a midrashic reading, nothing which seeks to find a mythic kernel. No attempt to grasp what the Bible is saying to us. We are just encouraged to laugh even more as the text falls apart. I suppose you can do the same to any other fairy tale or myth with such a brief narrative kernel. But it wouldn't be so funny to rail against Red Riding Hood!

Blumenthal's response to the absurdity of the narrative as a factual occurrence is to mythologise it – to see the Noah story as a re-enactment of creation, an unraveling of creation – going back to Genesis 1.1 and then tracking through repeating the same steps, repeating the act of creation which seems to have gone so wrong. Genesis 6-9 for Blumenthal is a retake of creation, although with some omissions since this time sun, moon, fish of the sea hardly needed recreation because of a flood.[21] Izzard, of course, has much fun with ducks – why did they need to be on the ark, they would have survived anyway, there are going to be too many ducks in the new creation, so much trouble ahead: "God: Sorry, I was…it's my week off. Oh, I forgot about the ducks. Oh shit! There's going to be a lot of evil…"[22]

Theologians, of course, tend to steer away from the failure of the text. Instead, they want to establish the theological structure of that text, the conceptual structure the narrative kernels. Perhaps to draw attention away from the text's realistic naïveté, they layer this structure with theological terms laden with eschatological promise to determine a theological reading of the text. So, while Blumenthal takes us back to creation, Daniel Streett imposes a covenant structure.[23]

1. Universality of the impending flood
2. The promise of a remnant
3. The reversal of creation
4. The cause of the Flood – humanity's violence (hamas) met by divine destruction (hamas)
5. New Creation
6. New Covenant

Others have shown that this conceptual battle over the meaning of the Noanic narrative is nothing new…the Bible itself seems to have pushed for a less than literal reading of the text. So in 1 Corinthians 10:11 – "these things happened as an example […] for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."[24] Streett maps this form of interpretation across

[20] Meredith, "A Big Room of Poo", p.200
[21] Blumenthal, "Noah's Ark", p.90
[22] Meredith, "A Big Room of Poo", p.201
[23] Daniel Streett, "As it was in the Days of Noah: The Prophets Typological Interpretation of Noah's Flood", *Criswell Theological Review* (5.1, 2007), pp.33-51, pp.37-8 with a good footnote outlining sources
[24] Streett, "Days of Noah", p.33 and comparing to Matthew 24, 2 Peter 2:1-9 and 2 Peter 3:3-10

Second Temple Judaism traditions – from the Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1-36), heavily used in Aaronofky's *Noah,* but originally pointing to eschatological imagery drawn from Deuteronomy 28:12, Psalm 85:11, Isaiah 65:20-23 and 66:18-23 – to Josephus' story of Seth's two stelae – both inscribed with wisdom – one in brick, the other in stone to survive fire and flood. Within the biblical traditions themselves, Streett points (in some considerable length) to Isaiah 24-27 and the cosmic upheaval brought by God, who opens up the windows of the heavens (Isaiah 24:18, Genesis 7:11, 8:2);[25] to Isaiah 54:8-10 with its direct reference to the Flood narrative; briefly to Zephaniah 1:2-18; and less convincingly in Daniel 9 and Amos 5:8. The imagery seems relatively frequent – indeed Streett refers to "God's *Chaoskampf* in which he conquers the forces of disorder to bring about a new creation…This reveals an underlying flood-exile typology in Isaiah's thought. The flood is the exile writ large: Israel's exile is like the flood on a national scale."[26]

But Blumenthal's whole point is not to laugh at the lack of realism but to suggest that this lack, this abhorrent vacuum, this counter-realism (tools, reversed rain season, allegorical geography) should point the reader to the metaphorical, allegorical aspects of the story. In other words, would you take Red Riding Hood seriously? But you would take the underlying message of Red Riding Hood seriously. You may not accept the myth, but you accept the truth behind the myth. Watch out for dangers in the forest!

Perhaps the problem with Noah is, as Meredith suggests, that the Genesis account doesn't sound like a fairy tale enough, it's just not good enough at giving us clues to read it as myth – we need it to start with "once upon a time". The genealogies of Gen 5, the contextual background of Gen 6, the incidental repetition (and relatively extensive detail) about the boat in Gen 6 and the animals in Gen 7, push us to expect more of the story, to fail in our suspension of disbelief. These very elements of the story push the reader towards a realism which plays against the metaphorical, the mythic, and sets up a kind of internal narrative war: "Is this a historical narrative or a fairy tale – I know how to deal with one or the other but not both at the same time!" Although even that seems to be pushing the argument too far – Shakespeare manages to weave fairy tale and history and internal narrative exceptionally well. In retelling the Noah narrative, Jordan and Aronofsky are seeking in their own ways to explore the tensions between myth/fairy tale and historical theophany, and to provide some form of resolution of it – of allowing the contemporary reader an entrance into the text, to begin to understand the encounter between the prophetic patriarch and his apparently violent God. Both subsequent narratives are radically different but are either all that unbiblical? Aren't both within the tradition of interpretation which the Bible itself affords to this rather sketchy attempt at an historic narrative.

Biblical literacy isn't necessarily about keeping to the facts of the text. It is about taking the Bible seriously: seriously enough to wrestle with it, to embrace it with your own imagination and to create a new text from the old. The two depictions of the Noah story rest on some sophisticated exploration of the original text and multilayered infusing of contemporary psychological and social narratives into the original bare schema. But the narrative kernel remains in both. Both of the new narratives would have actantial analysis grids the same as the Bible story. Both offer a (massively extended) retelling of the same quest – God telling Noah to build an ark to save a remnant. Both retellings add helpers and opponents. Both retellings add subplots. But the core narrative kernel remains the same.

[25] Streett, "Days of Noah", pp.39-46
[26] Street, "Days of Noah", p.49

Indeed, the additions allow the viewer to reflect deeper on that same narrative kernel in what they now regard as a safe space. If they were presented with the bald facts of the story – that God himself addresses an old man in the desert and tells him to build a boat to be filled with the his family and representatives of all the fauna in the world, it is unlikely that they would be willing to give the story credence. However, wrapt up in contemporary imagery, contemporary props and storylines, the original quest becomes another part of the story on which to reflect. The midrash, allowing the story to breathe, allows the story to have more socio-narrative impact today. And surely that's an aid to biblical literacy rather than an opposition?